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ABSTRACT

The new system of quality assurance for occupational or technical education that is emerging emphasizes three components: (1) occupational skill standards as the basis for program design; (2) skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals; and (3) job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs. Accreditation is a system to recognize educational institutions or professional programs that meet prescribed levels or standards of integrity, performance, and quality. It is a private, voluntary, nongovernmental, decentralized process that is unique to postsecondary education in the United States. The Council on Occupational Education Inc. (COE) was established as a not-for-profil education corporation to serve as a national accreditor for providers of postsecondary workforce training and education. The process it applies consists of an intensive self-study, followed by an on-site evaluation from a visiting team of professional educators and specialists, and then action by the accrediting commission regarding accreditation. The revised accreditation envisioned by the leaders of COE will use this approach with skill standards and skill certification for demonstrating learner competence. (Contains one figure and seven references.) (SLD)

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OUTCOMES-BASED ACCREDITATION OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION: A STRATEGY TO PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

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Introduction

Institutional accreditation began in the United States during the 1890s with the initial purpose of promoting standardization among schools of common types, e. g., high schools, colleges, or other distinctive types of institutions (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, 1990; Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Since the 1950s, accreditation has assumed a major role in assuring educational quality as a requirement for postsecondary educational institutions to participate in federal student financial aid programs. In the early 1950s, the Federal government established a regulation whereby institutions must be accredited by accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education in order to be eligible for participation in Federal student financial aid programs.

Occupational education accreditation as practiced historically has utilized a set of standards pertaining to all aspects of the institution that are applied by institutional personnel to conduct a self-study of the institution and an independent team of technical educators-evaluators to conduct an on-site assessment based on the same standards. While the process remains the same, the new system of occupational/technical education quality assurance (COE, 1995; COE, 1996) that is emerging places major emphases on three components: (1) occupational skill standards as the basis for program design, (2) skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals, and (3) job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs.

This presentation draws on a comprehensive perspective of the new accrediting system to illustrate the essential dimensions of quality assurance for technical education and its importance to students, employers of graduates, funding sources, and the public.

Overview of Accreditation

Accreditation is a system to recognize educational institutions or professional programs that meet prescribed levels or standards of integrity, performance, and quality (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, 1990, p. 3). From a product perspective, accreditation can be defined as a status ascribed to an institution or a program that has undergone evaluation and met stated criteria of educational quality (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 443). Accreditation of an institution by the Council on Occupational Education (COE or the Council) is a recognition granted to an occupational education institution indicating that it complies with the policies, standards, and procedures adopted by the member institutions of the Council. Accreditation by the Council does not, however, certify that all components of an institution are of equal quality, but does indicate that none of the components is weak enough to undermine the educational effectiveness of the institution as a whole (Coulton, 1990, p. 393).

Accreditation is a private, voluntary, non-governmental, decentralized process that is unique to postsecondary education in the United States of America. In many countries, the establishment and application of educational standards are performed by a central government agency. In this country, the public authority to regulate education has been reserved to the states under the Constitution. Accreditation has evolved as a mechanism to promote educational quality through the identification and application of quality standards by peers in a particular sector of the education community or a specific professional field.

The accreditation status of a school is important because it is considered to varying degrees in formal actions by many agencies and

individuals, for example, governmental funding agencies, foundations, employers, counselors, parents, and potential students. The general public is inclined to accept accreditation as a quality assurance indicator more readily than recently devised measures (e. g., program reviews, graduate surveys, and rankings). In the view of Bogue and Saunders (1992, p. 29), accreditation is probably the most widely recognized and highly regarded form of quality assurance among constituents of American postsecondary education. The activities and resources required to achieve and maintain accreditation are demanding and expensive in terms of personnel time and costs. These resources are well spent, however, when educational effectiveness and quality are enhanced through the accreditation process.

The Council on Occupational Education

The Council on Occupational Education, Inc. was established as a not-for-profit education corporation under the laws of State of Georgia in June, 1994, to serve as a national accreditor for all providers of postsecondary workforce training and education who can meet its standards, regardless of the type of provider, e.g., institution, corporation, local/state/federal government, community-based organization, and other potential providers. COE is committed to a skill standards, skill certification, and job placement outcomes-based approach which requires a program-specific evaluation of members. This breadth of future members in combination with the standards/outcomes-based policies and practices makes COE a unique and innovative contributor to American postsecondary education. There simply is no similar entity.

COE has evolved from the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) which was formed in 1971. Thus, it has extensive experience in accrediting programs in a wide range of settings, including non-degree and associate-degree institutions from public, private not-for-profit, and proprietary sectors; corporate and industry schools; military specialized training centers; and Job Corps Centers. Currently COE has approximately 340 accredited institutional members and about 12 candidates for accreditation.

An agreement, approved by COEI/COE and SACS in December, 1994, enabled COE to assume and maintain all COEI functions and records when separation from SACS occurred on June 30, 1995. Further, on December 28, 1994, Assistant Secretary David A. Longanecker, U.S. Department of Education, wrote Dr. Harry L. Bowman, Executive Director of both the former COEI and the new COE, confirming that the Secretary of Education "will consider COE to be the successor to COEI." The signing of this agreement with SACS and the clarification of the federal status were the final steps needed in order for COE to begin functioning as an independent, national accreditor of workforce programs in the Summer of 1995, when it completed its separation from SACS.

Simultaneously with separation from SACS, COE underwent its regularly scheduled reviews by the U.S. Secretary of Education and by the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) for "re-recognition" as an accreditor. The reviews by both the Secretary of Education and CORPA resulted in an expanded scope of recognition for COE

to include a national geographic scope and applied associate degree-granting institutions.

The COE Accreditation System

COE's predecessor agency, COEI of SACS, was created in 1971 as a result of a conference on occupational education that was held in April, 1967, under the sponsorship of SACS. During the ensuing four years, a committee on occupational education developed and field tested the policies, standards, and procedures that were used initially by COEI for school accreditation. Those policies, standards, and procedures have been expanded and refined over the years as the nature and variety of technical education programs have changed. A schematic depiction of the accreditation process based on COE policies, standards, and procedures is presented in Figure 1. The major stages of the accreditation process are described briefly below.

The first stage in the accreditation process is an intensive self-study that is conducted by school-related personnel to measure progress toward achieving stated objectives. The primary focus of the self-study is on the policies and 12 standards for accreditation that have been adopted by the COE member institutions. The policies cover many procedural and operational aspects of an institution. The standards address the following areas: institutional mission, organization and administration, long-range planning, educational programs, staff, facilities, equipment and supplies, financial resources, learning resources, placement and follow-up, student personnel services, and community and public relations.

The second stage is an on-site evaluation of the school by a visiting team of professional educators and specialists, accompanied by lay persons at times.

The visiting team assesses the school in reference to the COE policies and standards as well as the institution's self-study. The team makes professional judgments about the extent of compliance with the policies and standards and may offer suggestions for the improvement of educational practices based on team members' expertise. The team submits a written report on its findings, recommendations, and suggestions to the accrediting agency which, in turn, shares the report with the school.

If the team report contains any recommendations indicating non-compliance with any policies and/or standards, the third stage in the process is the preparation and submission of a report by the school to the accrediting agency to address those recommendations. The school is expected to have eliminated the deficiencies identified in the recommendations or at least to have implemented a plan to correct the deficiencies. The response report details those actions taken by the school following the team visit to comply with the COE policies and standards.

The final stage in the process is action by the accrediting commission regarding accreditation of the school. The accrediting commission relies on the self-study, team report, and response report, if applicable, to make its decision. The action is based on the documentation that is provided to demonstrate compliance of the institution with the policies and standards of the accrediting commission. Any adverse decision of the accrediting commission can be appealed in accordance with procedures established by the membership. The reaffirmation of an institution's accreditation follows the same cycle and is conducted within two to six years.

The New Vision of Outcomes-Based Accreditation

The importance of technical education to the future of the country is reflected in national policies as expressed in several federal legislative actions. Examples of federal initiatives that address this concern are the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Job Corps Centers, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, School-To-Work Opportunities Act, and Welfare Reform. The legislative mandate given to the National Skill Standards Board in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act is especially significant to future workforce preparation as it relates to the development of skill standards and assessment/certification of skill standards attainment.

The revised accrediting system envisioned by the leaders of COE will be designed to continue assuring quality and integrity in postsecondary technical education institutions with some new emphases. COE has initiated a thorough review and revision of its standards to stress the use of:

a. skill standards as the basis for designing programs that address current job market needs,
b. skill certification for demonstrating learner competence upon completion of programs and providing transportable credentials, and
c. placement of recipients of occupational education in their respective fields of preparation for documenting program impact in meeting job market needs.

The accreditation standards of the Council that have evolved over the years include some elements of the system. Institutions are required to consult with the employer community in developing the content for its programs and to involve employers in periodic review of programs. Quantitative outcomes

that must be met by each program are a 40% completion rate, a 50% placement rate, and a 70% pass rate on licensure examinations when required to enter a career field.

The Council has initiated a project involving a five-member panel to conduct a review and propose revisions of its standards to incorporate added emphases on skill standards, skill certification, and placement of program completers in jobs related to the area of training received. The panel is in the process of reviewing all requirements of the current standards to make recommendations on retention, revision, deletion, and additions. The report of the panel to the Council's member institutions will be presented for action at the Council's annual meeting in November 1997.

Concluding Statement

Since its inception toward the end of the 19th century, institutional accreditation has undergone many changes in philosophy and process as refinement has occurred. The history of accreditation reveals that it has become a widely used mechanism for ensuring institutional quality in this country. The view of Young and his associates captures the essence of this history: "The genius of accreditation is that it began with the impossible task of defining educational quality and in just 25 years evolved, by trial and error, into a process that advances educational quality" (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 13). Technical education accreditation performed by COE has had a similar history since 1971 as it has evolved into an effective process to assure quality in technical education institutions. With its commitment to make its accreditation even more outcomes-based, the new

COE is leading a move into a new era for institutional accreditation and quality assurance.

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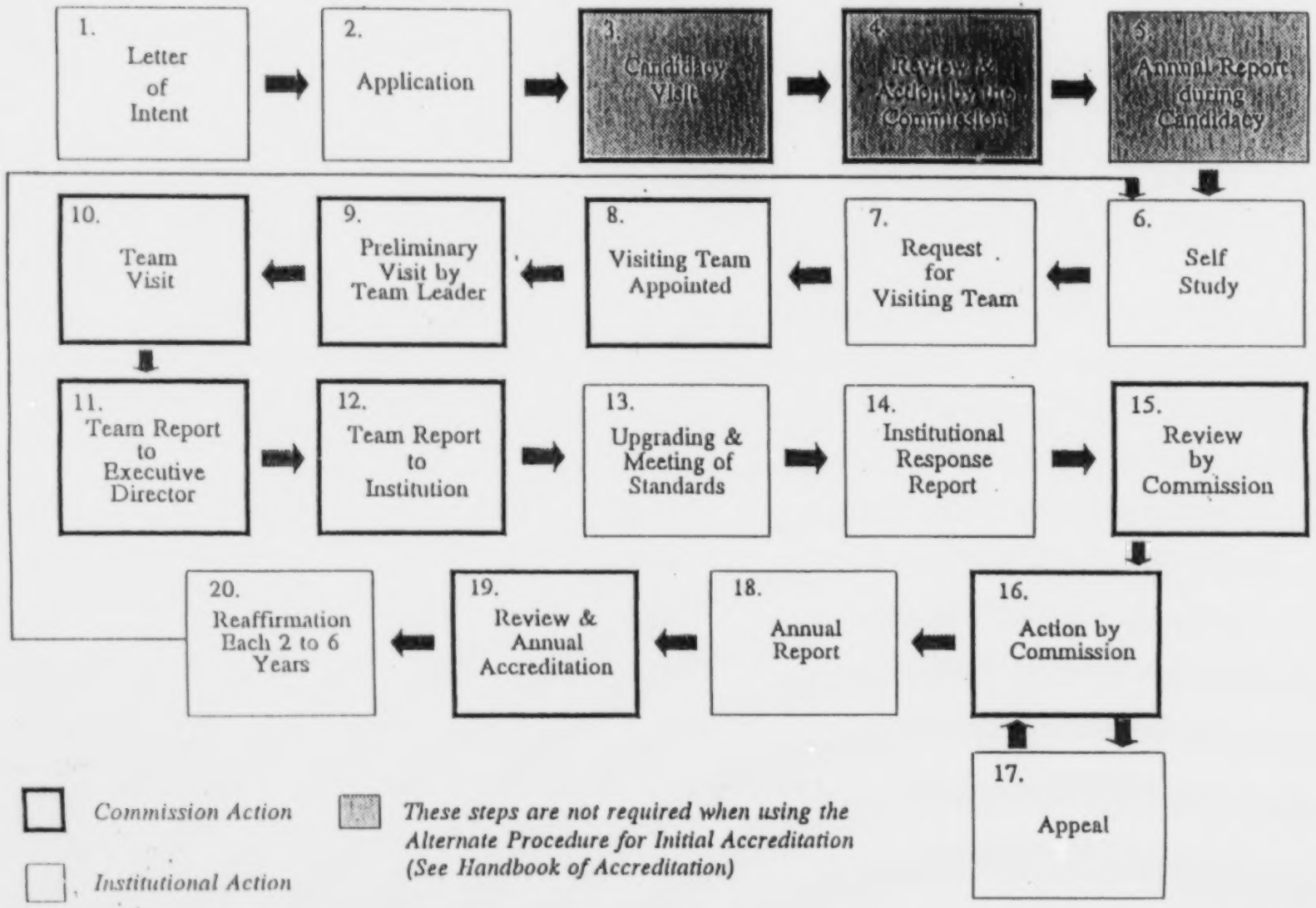
FIGURE 1

The Accreditation Process

Accrediting Commission of the Council on Occupational Education


1. Letter of Intent
2. Application
3. Candidacy Visit
4. Review & Action by the Commission
5. Annual Report during Candidacy
6. Self Study
7. Request for Visiting Team
8. Visiting Team Appointed
9. Preliminary Visit by Team Leader
10. Team Visit
11. Team Report to Executive Director
12. Team Report to Institution
13. Upgrading & Meeting of Standards
14. Institutional Response Report
15. Review by Commission
16. Action by Commission
17. Appeal
18. Annual Report
19. Review & Annual Accreditation
20. Reaffirmation Each 2 to 6 Years
Commission Action
Institutional Action
These steps are not required when using the Alternate Procedure for Initial Accreditation (See Handbook of Accreditation)